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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 000468

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BA](#) [POL](#)  
SUBJECT: AL WIFAQ BLOC RETURNS TO PARLIAMENT AFTER A  
PROTEST WALKOUT OVER CORRUPTION QUESTIONING

Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) A vote on May 15 on the questioning of Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Shaikh Ahmed Bin Attiyatallah Al Khalifa on corruption allegations fell one vote short of the majority needed in the Council of Representatives (COR). For his part, Shaikh Ahmed said in a public statement May 9 that he was innocent of the allegations and was willing to appear before parliament to clear his name. Al Wifaq, which has sponsored and supported the questioning, welcomed his willingness and urged him to appear voluntarily. Deputy Prime Minister Jawad Al Arrayed told the Ambassador May 17 that the King was counseling patience with Al Wifaq as its democratic skills develop. Al Wifaq MP Dr. Jasim Hussain told Pol/Econ Chief that even though Al Wifaq did not expect the COR to allow the questioning at this time, it was important for the bloc to push the corruption issue for their constituents. End summary.

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Failed Vote Results in Walkout  
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¶2. (SBU) Al Wifaq MPs returned to the COR May 15 after walking out in protest on May 8. The walkout followed a failed vote to allow the finance committee to question Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Shaikh Ahmed Bin Attiyatallah Al Khalifa about corruption allegations. The vote fell one short of the 21-vote majority of the 40-member chamber needed for approval, with COR Speaker Khalifa Al Dhahrani and independent MPs Abdul Aziz Abul and Abdulla Al Dossary joining the 17-member Al Wifaq bloc in support of the proposal. Disgusted by the lack of support from fellow MPs, members of Al Wifaq left the weekly session early. Some of the MPs voting against the proposal claimed the questioning was unconstitutional, saying the Bandar report that prompted Al Wifaq's proposal to question Shaikh Ahmed remains the subject of an ongoing court case. After the vote, Speaker Al Dhahrani decided to postpone discussion on the issue until the fall, following the summer recess.

¶3. (SBU) Shaikh Ahmed released a statement May 9 affirming his innocence and his willingness to appear before the parliament. He said all citizens must obey the law, and "those who do not adhere to the law should not be entrusted to carry out executive or legislative duties." He said Al Wifaq's accusations of his wasting public funds, carrying out business while a minister, and violating tender regulations, were all charges for which there was no evidence. "This is an opportunity for me to unveil the whole truth and demonstrate my faithfulness to the oath I took to God and the nation." Al Wifaq welcomed Shaikh Ahmed's apparent

willingness to address parliament and May 10 urged him to appear voluntarily to clear up the issues in question.

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Insight into Palace, Al Wifaq Perspectives  
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¶4. (C) In a conversation with the Ambassador May 17, Deputy Prime Minister Jawad Al Arrayed said that in a meeting he had with the King and the PM, the King had counseled patience with Al Wifaq in parliament and the Shia in general. "You have to remember that they have essentially been out of the system for 30 years. It is going to take time for them to get used to participating and to develop the skills and the skilled people to participate effectively." Al Arrayed told the Ambassador that Al Wifaq's push for the questioning of Shaikh Ahmed with so little time left in the current legislative session was not smart tactically.

¶5. (C) MP Dr. Jasim Hussain told Pol/Econ Chief May 20 that Al Wifaq had not expected the COR to allow the questioning of Shaikh Ahmed at this time, but that Al Wifaq had decided it was important to press the issue anyway. He admitted that one reason was to show supporters that Al Wifaq was pushing the government on important issues, including corruption. This push gives Al Wifaq a talking point to use in meetings with constituents, many of whom question whether Al Wifaq accomplished anything by entering parliament. In terms of the vote itself, Hussain said that, in Al Wifaq's view, the government had choreographed the voting so that the measure would not receive the 21 votes it needed. Consequently it gave the green light to Speaker Al Dhahrani to vote for the questioning as a token of support for Al Wifaq and the COR's prerogatives, while the vote went down in defeat.

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¶6. (C) In a conversation with PolFSN May 16, Al Wifaq MP Sayed Haider Al Sitri said that he could not understand how (Sunni Salafi) Al Asala head and first deputy speaker Ghanim Al Buainain and (Sunni Muslim Brotherhood) Al Minbar head and second deputy speaker Salah Ali could vote in favor of the questioning of Shaikh Ahmed in the COR Executive Council meeting and then change their vote in the full session of the COR. He complained that each of the three other parliamentary blocs have ignored the evidence Al Wifaq has presented to them that the minister was involved in corruption. Al Wifaq MP Abduljalil Khalil told PolFSN in a separate conversation, "We know that the parliament has limited authority to generate and pass legislation. At least the COR can use its leverage to combat corruption and monitor the executive branch. This is what Al Wifaq is attempting, but other MPs are not helping."

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Public Seminar Organized by Al Wifaq  
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¶7. (SBU) At a May 13 Al Wifaq open meeting with supporters to discuss the questioning of Shaikh Ahmed, MP Khalil Al Marzooq pointed out that in September 2006, in the wake of the release of the Bandar report, Shaikh Ahmed did not deny that he had personally written checks to individuals, but claimed they were for personal business purposes. Al Marzooq said that this in itself is against Article 48, part b, of the constitution, which states that "a Minister may not assume any other public office, nor may he even indirectly practice a profession or conduct industrial, commercial or financial business." Al Marzooq called on all government ministers to combat corruption in their respective ministries so that COR questioning of them would not be necessary.

¶8. (SBU) Wa'ad political society president Ibrahim Sharif also addressed the audience, saying that the COR votes showed that Al Asala and Al Minbar were not serious about combating corruption. In the five years they have spoken about

corruption in the COR, they have never requested to question a government official on this issue, Sharif said. He pointed out that Islamists in Kuwait's parliament question ministers almost weekly and Bahrain's Sunni Islamist blocs have never described this practice as irresponsible. Sharif urged Al Wifaq to discontinue its efforts at avoiding hot-button issues to build trust with other blocs. Al Wifaq should continue to push hard on the issue of questioning Shaikh Ahmed, in his view.

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Columnists and Bloggers Weigh In  
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¶9. (SBU) Arabic daily Al Wasat Editor-in-Chief Mansour Al Jamri wrote May 15 that this episode has shown that the parliament is a toy to play with and not meant for serious work, and blocs opposing the questioning of Shaikh Ahmed are only concerned about not upsetting the government. Bahraini blogger Mahmoud Al Yousif wrote May 10 that it appears Shaikh Ahmed has "not only secured himself immunity against punishment, but has the full backing of the government in addition to more than half our elected parliament fighting tooth and nail to allay him the discomfort of facing questions about financial irregularities." He called on Shaikh Ahmed to present himself voluntarily to committee questioning to clear up not only questions about financial impropriety, but also his alleged role in Bandar report-related matters.

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Comment  
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¶10. (C) The opposition's efforts to pin down Shaikh Ahmed for questioning about alleged business operations is the tip of the iceberg regarding what it would like to find out about Shaikh Ahmed's involvement in activities described in the Bandar report. Although it is too little, too late for the current legislative session, Al Wifaq hopes this action will eventually lead to results, and Al Wifaq has been clear about its intention to pursue corruption allegations about Shaikh Ahmed. Earlier Al Wifaq cooperation with other blocs in parliament had been fruitful on issues of common interest, and the blocs were able to build some trust. The issue of questioning a minister from the royal family about corruption allegations, however, has highlighted the pro-government/opposition divide, which will not be easily overcome.

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